

Yom Kippur 5780

09 October 2019 / 10 Tishrei 5780

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969) was an American pastor. In the 1920s and 1930s, he became a central figure in the controversy between Fundamentalism and Modernism in American Protestantism. He was one of the most prominent liberal ministers in the early 20th century, and he spent his entire career in Manhattan. He spoke out against injustice and racism in his country. He could be compared to Rabbi Abraham Geiger who lived in Germany in the 19th century (1810-1874), and who sought to reconcile Religion and Modernity.

In 1963, Pastor Fosdick wrote,

“We ask the leaf, ‘Are you complete in yourself?’. And the leaf answers, ‘No, my life is in the branches’. We ask the branch, and the branch answers, ‘No, my life is in the root’. We ask the root, and it answers, ‘No, my life is in the trunk and the branches, and the leaves. Keep the branches stripped of leaves, and I shall die’. So it is with the great tree of being. Nothing is completely and merely individual¹”.

Yesterday evening, I talked about our time, and the challenges we are facing. We came to realize that Brexit, the climate emergency, and social media, were creating a vast amount of anxiety in our society, to the point that some psychologists have now identified an existential anxiety induced mainly by these three factors: what is our future? Do we even have a future?

We came to the conclusion that the only answer to this anxiety is to resist. To resist the doom and gloom of the day, largely engineered by media outlets that put a negative extreme spin on the news to get our attention. They know that we have a negativity bias, and they play with it. Our consumer society makes us numb and divert our attention to possessing rather than being. There is one expression that captures it very well, and it is ‘value for money’. We want to have something in return for our money, as if it was the only and ultimate value. We seem to have forgotten that money is only a tool – a very necessary one, I agree -, and that the real value in our world is you, each of you, how much we can contribute with our skills, our empathy, and our ability to better the world.

¹ Quoted by R. John Rayner, *Siddur Lev Chadash*, 1995, p. 216.

On Shabbat Shuva – the Shabbat that is between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur-, we talked about the Shofar, the meaning of the Shofar blasts - one hundred for Rosh Hashanah only -, as a waking call for sleepy souls. In ancient Jerusalem watchmen would warn the inhabitants of the city of invaders with the sound of the Shofar. Any new king in Israel would be crowned with a great Shofar blast. This primeval sound goes down into the deepest parts of our soul and shakes us to the core. Tonight, I have asked shofar blowers to add their voices to the last *teki'ah gedolah*, so that the sound of the Shofarot reaches the highest places in heaven.

The truth is, human societies are very fragile organizations. They are based on shared narratives and institutions that can be effective only if there is enough trust in them. Democracy is powerful only if citizens believe in it, trusting that political bodies will solve their problems. Our economy is also based on trust and reputation. There are countless examples of companies which lost shares in the Stock Exchange simply because of mere rumours. Our incomes are paid into a bank account with electronic money, and we need to believe that it is real money. These numbers will determine what we can spend in the coming month, how much we can save for our future, and it is all based on figures that have no reality other than being displayed on our computer screens.

We have created human societies based on stories and trust, and these foundations are very fragile. It takes only a slight imbalance in the system to provoke a crisis. In 2008, global markets have lost an estimate of 2.8 trillion \$ in only a few months. Much of this money was created by speculation and didn't really exist in the real world. And yet, we can still feel the effects of this global crisis today.

Yuval Noah Hariri, history professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, has published a series of books that take an holistic approach of human history. He is one of these large minds who are able to see the global, holistic evolution of humanity.

In 2014, he published his first ground-breaking work called *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*. He explains that our direct ancestors, *Homo Sapiens*, appeared first 300,000 years ago. They had nothing special, except that they had large brains, worked upright, and were highly social, but so did the other species of humans. *Homo Sapiens* prospered and overspread the globe, probably thanks to their slightly superior skills and technology. They pushed

other human species toward extinction, and simultaneously interbred with them.

Yuval Noah Hariri distinguishes several revolutions undergone by *Homo Sapiens* that explain why we are now the dominant species on earth.

70,000 years ago, the brain of early human went through an evolutionary leap that he defines as the 'cognitive revolution'. They began to form larger, more sophisticated communities; they invented more complex hunting tools, and they began to establish trade networks. As a consequence of that, *Homo Sapiens* spread all over the globe, from their original birthplace in Eastern Africa to the four corners of the earth.

They were also able to develop complex language, allowing them to share vital information on where to find food, where the predators were, and, how to cooperate between human communities and create complex organisations.

Language allowed them also to discuss abstract ideas, like gods, history, and rights. Yuval Hariri calls these stories the *common myths*, and describes them as fictional creations of the human brain. They are the cornerstone of human culture, even when people do not know each other, and they bring about a collective ground for our societies. By sharing these common myths about religion or identity or freedom, communities of individuals are forged.

Thanks to language and common myths, it was possible to increase the size of our communities, from villages to cities to states, and to the global society of today².

These common myths are fragile, as they are based on consensus and acceptance. But they are also very strong and effective, because they forged the human beings we are today. It would be a grave mistake to underestimate the power of common myths as the cement that links us together.

For example, all Jews around the world, despite differences in their level of observance, despite their localisation, and despite which corner of the Jewish people they identify with, are celebrating Yom Kippur today as a day of self-reflection. All Jews connect to the idea of Pesach as the celebration of freedom, or to our people as a collective with a certain historical fate. We share those *common myths* that are some sort of cultural Jewish DNA.

² Summary of Yuval Noah Hariri's works can be found on an app called Blinkist.

That leads me to the last part of my message for this day of Yom Kippur. If I asked you today, 'What it means for you to be Jewish?' you would certainly come up with many answers. And yet, we all relate to this day as a time when we come together and celebrate being Jewish. Unfortunately, there are many Jews who do not feel any connection to our people, some say between 50% to 60% of the total of existing Jews, and we can see our numbers dwindling, at least in the West. It is such a shame, because those Jews will not transmit Judaism to their children, and many Jewish lineages will disappear. We can hear their voices vanishing from our world, making it poorer and poorer.

In 1927, Edmond Fleg, a French writer and thinker, born in Geneva in 1874, wrote a book called "Pourquoi je suis Juif", *Why I am Jewish*. In his work, Edmond Fleg tried to articulate his vision of Judaism, a religion that is particular to one people, and yet universalistic in its message. He concluded it by a passage that is a real compendium of Jewish identity.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel asks every possible sacrifice of my soul.

I am a Jew because in all places where there are tears and suffering the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because in every age when the cry of despair is heard the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the message of Israel is the most ancient and the most modern.

I am a Jew because Israel's promise is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because for Israel the world is not finished; men will complete it.

I am a Jew because for Israel man is not yet fully created; men are creating him.

I am a Jew because Israel places man and his unity above nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because above man, image of the divine unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.

-- Edmond Fleg, "Why I Am a Jew"

We do not want this message to be lost. We do not want the voices of our prophets, our sages, our foremothers and forefathers to disappear in the vacuum of time and forgetfulness. We have a message for the world. Our voice is unique, and yet universal. We say to the world, our common destiny is stronger than anything else. We have a mission, that is to correct the world, to amend our ways to make our planet a safe place for us all.

We say to the world, every single life is precious and unique. Whoever destroys one single life, it is as if the entire world were destroyed. And whoever saves one single life, it is as if the entire world were saved (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Koran 5:32).

I want to send you on a mission today. Maybe you know in your neighbourhood some of those Jews who are estranged from any community; maybe you have knowledge of people who want to seek God and meaning through Judaism. Go and talk to them, and then talk to me. I want to reach out to those people and bring them back to the Jewish People.

We yearn for a strong community, a place where people feel safe, a place where Judaism is experienced, learned, loved and transmitted. And we want that because we know that our universal and humanistic message is what our fellow human beings need in this day and age.

When clouds are building up over our heads, when our time is but gloom and doom, we need more than ever a strong community, a laboratory of human relationships, a place of love and solace, a place where it feels good to be Jewish, and a community that radiates towards the outside world a strong message that the future is in our hands, that we have a choice to build a better world for all people. Each of us has a role to play, and your mission for 5780 is to spread the word, to connect with other single-minded people, Jews, or those who are not yet Jewish, to join our community, and to make it stronger and vibrant. We will succeed only if we are together in this adventure.

Ken Yehi Ratzon,

May it be God's Will

Rabbi Dr René Pfertzel

Kingston Liberal Synagogue